

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Northwest Regional Working Group Meeting 3

Date: February 8, 2024, 9 am - 4 pm PST

Location: Seattle City Hall - 600 4th Avenue, Seattle, WA

1. Introduction

Under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA), FRA is conducting a study to evaluate the restoration of daily intercity passenger rail service along:

- any Amtrak Long-Distance routes that were discontinued; and
- any Amtrak Long-Distance routes that occur on a nondaily basis.

FRA may also evaluate potential new Amtrak Long-Distance routes, including with specific attention provided to routes in service as of April 1971 but not continued by Amtrak.

As part of the study, FRA is engaging with State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations (MPO), regional passenger rail authorities, and local officials and listening to stakeholders, including transportation and rail partners, federally recognized tribes, and the broader stakeholder community, as we evaluate how to better connect people with long-distance rail services.

So far, FRA has hosted three of four total rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage these stakeholders. This third round of meetings was held in February 2024, with the Northwest regional meeting taking place on February 8. The purpose of this round of meetings was to brief stakeholders about the progress of the study; inform participants of the methodology for developing routes, route schedules, and cost estimates; review preferred routes; and receive feedback on prioritization concepts for implementation timeframes and ongoing collaboration and planning.

The meeting was held both in person in Seattle, Washington, as well as online for virtual participants. Each regional working group meeting followed a similar agenda, which is summarized below:

- Welcome and Introductions
- Study Overview – What We’ve Heard So Far
- Route Development and Evaluation Methodology
- Discussion of Route Development and Evaluation
- Identification of Routes
- Discussion of Route Identification
- Approach for Development of Route Service
- Development of Capital and Operations & Maintenance Cost Estimates
- Prioritization and Implementation Feedback
- Ongoing Collaboration and Planning

This summary provides both an overview of the information shared at the Northwest regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The Northwest regional working group meeting began with a welcome from FRA, followed by a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves and the study

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team reviewed the meeting agenda and objectives. Regional working group participants in attendance, both in-person and virtually, are listed at the end of this summary.

Figure 1. Participants at Northwest Regional Working Group Meeting 3 on February 8 in Seattle, Washington



3. Study Overview and What We've Heard So Far

FRA began by providing meeting attendees with an overview of the study scope and what had occurred since the last round of regional meetings. FRA detailed the legislative direction for the study, which will result in a report to Congress that includes recommendations for preferred options for restoring or enhancing long-distance service, a review of funding options, estimated costs and public benefits of long-distance service enhancement or restoration, and a prioritized inventory of capital projects to restore or enhance service. The overview gave an opportunity for participants to understand the study's objectives and FRA's vision for using their feedback in the future.

An attendee asked whether long-distance routes identified in the study would have to go through the Corridor ID process. FRA responded that not every potential long-distance route is eligible for Corridor ID, which depends on whether routes are new or previously discontinued (new routes are not eligible under Corridor ID).

Next, the study team provided a summary of feedback received during the second series of the regional meetings and the comments received from the study website. The team gave an overview of comments as they pertained to geographic and service priorities.

4. Route Development and Evaluation Methodology

Next, the study team presented attendees with the methodology used to develop and evaluate potential routes. This was approached in three sections. First, the team discussed the methodology used to develop potential new long-distance routes, followed by a description of the methodology used to evaluate them.

The methodology for developing potential routes was informed by the four IIJA legislative considerations that guide the study: link and serve large and small communities, advance the economic and social well-being of the United States, provide enhanced connectivity, and reflect public engagement and local and regional support. Routes were developed to address metropolitan area travel flows, rural accessibility, and geographic coverage/network connectivity. The methodology also considered stakeholder input and discontinued long-distance routes. This resulted in a range of route options for evaluation.

To evaluate route options, the team utilized criteria that aligned with the legislative considerations, including:

- Metropolitan Area Travel Flows
- Rural Accessibility
- Geographic Coverage/Network Connectivity
- Stakeholder Input

The study team also leveraged knowledge and experience of rail planning and considered the previously discontinued routes to evaluate routes.

5. Discussion of Route Development and Evaluation Methodology

One attendee noted that the catchment areas that were used (50 miles for areas outside of metropolitan statistical areas) are not representative of how far many people in the northwest region are willing to travel. They suggested increasing the catchment area to 90 miles. Another agreed, noting that in Montana and other states in the west, people are willing to travel farther for services, sometimes even spending the day traveling 100 or more miles for groceries. Both advocated for a broadened definition of catchment areas. A third attendee also noted that, because the western region of the United States is an outlier in the context of travel times, an expanded catchment area would allow for a more equitable analysis. The FRA responded that the size of the catchment areas was developed for analysis purposes and was also reviewed against Amtrak data. The catchment areas represent a consistent approach to identify the populations that could be served by passenger rail.

An attendee also added that the study team should consider that there are many trips that people are not yet making because of the lack of affordable options (for example, to get from Billings, Montana to Missoula, Montana, a traveler would first have to fly to Denver to catch a connecting flight back to Montana, which is cost-prohibitive) and that because of this, current traveler data are skewed. They noted that passenger rail will allow new ways of traveling to be available to people who previously could not make certain trips by car or plane.

6. Identification of Routes

After discussing methodology, the study team presented the proposed network of preferred routes map to the working group. The map showed the proposed preferred routes illustrated on top of the baseline map of existing service. The restoration of daily Cardinal and Sunset Limited passenger rail service was assumed when identifying the proposed network of preferred routes. The 15 proposed preferred routes were:

- Chicago - Miami
- Dallas/Fort Worth - Miami

- Denver - Houston
- Los Angeles - Denver
- Phoenix - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- Dallas/Fort Worth - New York
- Houston - New York
- Seattle - Denver
- San Antonio - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- San Francisco - Dallas/Fort Worth
- Detroit - New Orleans
- Denver - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- Seattle - Chicago
- Dallas/Fort Worth - Atlanta
- El Paso - Billings

The study team then outlined key takeaways from the comparison between the baseline network and preferred network, which included:

- 45 million additional Americans reached by rail
- 61 additional Metropolitan Statistical Areas served
- 91% of all U.S. higher education institutions served
- 75 total National Parks, Recreation Areas, and Preserves served
- 43% increase in rural and transportation-disadvantaged populations served
- 74% of previously unserved populations on tribal lands served
- 23,200 long-distance route miles added
- 86% of all U.S. medical centers served

Please see the regional working group presentation at <https://fralongdistancerailstudy.org/meeting-materials/> for additional information and data descriptions related to these takeaways.

7. Discussion of Route Identification

During the presentation of the identified routes, the working group discussed and provided feedback on the identified routes.

An attendee asked about the El Paso – Billings route, and why it didn't include an extension farther north past Billings and eventually to Calgary. The study team pointed out that they were constrained to the 48 contiguous states. However, they also noted that in future planning efforts, extensions north of Billings could be considered.

Another attendee asked the team how certain alignments were identified as preferred over other alignment options. Specifically, the study team's preferred Seattle – Denver route has an optional alignment that includes a portion of the discontinued Pioneer route in Wyoming instead of the selected route option. The study team answered that the selected route option provided service to important intermediate markets in Utah, and that other routes considered in this study include the portion of the discontinued Pioneer route in Wyoming.

An attendee asked how the study team determined the calculations for the percentage of discontinued route miles restored. FRA responded that the calculation is based on any portion of track that overlaps a previously discontinued long-distance route.

In the context of the Billings – El Paso route, an attendee noted that the route option to the east passes through or near the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations. They asked why the other route was chosen as the

preferred alternative. The study team responded that they chose the alignment based on the evaluation criteria, but that in the future, other alternatives could be considered. Another attendee pointed out that the preferred alignment passes through the Wind River Indian Reservation.

Another attendee noted that the population statistics may not present the bigger picture of additional people reached by preferred routes. They asked whether the team had analyzed the increase in service that would happen when rural communities can make more trips between existing rail and newer connections. The study team responded that at the current point in the study they have evaluated the population served, but potential new demand will be evaluated later in the study.

8. Approach for Development of Route Service

Once the study team had reviewed the preferred routes, they presented the development of conceptual run times, which will eventually inform conceptual schedules. These conceptual run times and schedules will be used to inform cost estimation, travel demand estimation, and future investment analysis. The study team then gave an overview of the conceptual run times they had developed for each preferred route.

An attendee requested that the team also consider and present the times of not just end-to-end trips, but also intermediate markets, as many people will be riding only sections of the routes.

An attendee also made a comment that a truly “world-class” rail system would feature more than once-daily service and would limit sticker-shock on overhead costs. They urged the study team to consider comparing the overall economic and social benefits and return on investment for twice-daily service. The study team noted that the intention and mandate of the study was not focused on multiple frequencies as much as restored service and connectivity, but that twice-daily service could be considered in a future planning process. Another attendee suggested that the study team add a section in its report to Congress that acknowledges different considerations, including increased frequency. They added that because the final report will be viewed as a political document, it will be important to include analysis or discussion of various conditions that could change or effect the official evaluation.

Amtrak noted that they have conducted a survey to analyze how long-distance demand would change depending on frequency. Based on the results of that survey, they noted that twice-daily service does not appear to be a sensitive variable or a change that would create higher demand. Another attendee suggested that utilizing multiple alignments for the same trip could help provide multiple daily trips. The study team responded that the preferred route options are not final, and that each route will need further analysis and planning after this study is complete, which could include considering frequency.

9. Development of Capital and Operations & Maintenance Cost Estimate

Next, the study team gave an overview of the methodology used to develop capital cost estimates in addition to operations and maintenance (O&M) estimates.

The overview of the capital cost estimate methodology included a description of different types of passenger service-specific project costs associated with implementing new long-distance routes. Cost estimates will be developed using the FRA Budgeting Tool’s Standard Cost Categories (SCC) system, which classifies different types of costs into different categories. The methodology to estimate capital costs was developed to provide high-level order-of-magnitude capital costs to support early project planning. Capital cost estimates include 35% allocated contingency to address project risks. Capital cost estimates will include passenger-service-specific project costs, including track upgrades, stations, maintenance facilities, and signaling/communications/positive train control, and rolling stock. It does not include capacity improvement projects.

To estimate O&M costs, the team used Amtrak Performance Tracking statistics for fiscal year 2019 and applied weighted average unit costs for existing long-distance routes to preferred routes with the same number of nights

and days operated per week. The O&M cost estimates will also be reported as a range. The low- and high-range of cost estimates for O&M will reflect the variation in marginal unit costs by operating statistic of existing long-distance routes.

10. Interactive Session: Prioritization and Implementation Timeframes Feedback

After the presentation of cost estimate methodology, the meeting transitioned to an interactive activity using Mural, an online interactive tool. The activity allowed meeting attendees (both in the room and participating online) to provide input on route prioritization, and which considerations they thought were the most important. Prioritization considerations were sorted into five categories: public and rider benefits, capital cost estimates, O&M cost estimates, complexity in development and implementation, and consistency with intercity passenger rail projects.

During the interactive activity, attendees placed dots onto virtual sticky notes that listed the categories for consideration, allowing for a visualization of which categories attendees thought were most important. The attendees were also asked to share other examples of considerations that they thought were important.

The interactive activity revealed that the Northwest regional working group participants viewed “public and rider benefits” and “consistency with intercity passenger rail projects” to be the two most important categories to consider when prioritizing implementation of routes.

Results of the interactive activities are available on the [project website](#).

11. Ongoing Collaboration and Planning

After the interactive activities, the study team presented ideas for ongoing collaboration and interaction with other organizations and stakeholders. In the last meeting series, participants were asked how FRA and Amtrak could coordinate with stakeholders about current and future long-distance services. The team presented the themes that arose during the conversation, including community and rider engagement as well as coordinated planning. They also reviewed potential models of governance bodies.

Following this review, FRA introduced the idea of a new Long-Distance Public Committee. The committee could serve several functions and focus on ongoing feedback for long-distance service.

An attendee suggested that the committee encourage members to consider various options for how Amtrak routes could connect with local transportation networks and service providers.

Another attendee suggested that the team look to previous examples of rail improvement oversight, such as the Texas Eagle Marketing and Performance Organization (TEMPO), and garner lessons learned from them to inform the oversight of the Long-Distance Public Committee.

One attendee said they would like to see labor representatives from all levels of operation represented on the committee. Adding to this, another attendee requested that local MPOs be represented on the committee roster. The study team responded that one challenge with creating a committee will be to determine the size and scope. The attendee followed up by saying that the committee members will need to have strong local networks in order to keep appropriate transportation stakeholders up to date on planning.

Another attendee suggested a “tiered” approach to committee formation, wherein each rail corridor has its own aligned working group that eventually aligns with the broader Long-Distance Public Committee.

The study team also introduced an idea for a recurring, high-level long-distance planning process, potentially updated approximately every five years. The process would document existing long-distance service, trends and forecasts, proposed rail programs and investments, as well as the status of previously proposed long-distance passenger rail plans, projects, or other programs.

An attendee said that they liked the idea but wondered how FRA would organize it. They suggested keeping regional meetings, as they provide good opportunities to make decisions with other stakeholders in similar contexts. They also spoke in favor of a more integrated planning process with the Corridor ID program to ensure that state-funded and long-distance rail are planned alongside each other.

Another attendee noted that there are many types of rail plans published by Amtrak, state DOTs, and local entities, and cohesion between plans must be taken into consideration. An attendee added that the focus of a public committee could be on establishing clear implementation for the plan to be achievable. Another attendee recommended that the team find ways to tap into local knowledge of transportation systems, and significantly consider the role of and impact on local communities within a national plan.

An attendee asked the study team what incentive states would have to apply for Corridor ID grants once there is a prioritized list of routes to be implemented if some corridors could be addressed by the outcome of the plan. The team responded that a plan would provide an outline of the needs, but funding could come from multiple places, including Corridor ID. Another attendee noted that having a plan like this could provide a pathway and framework for states and other governments that may not have the resources or capacity to create their own plans.

An attendee warned against relying on localities to plan, especially due to challenging political differences across state lines. Another attendee suggested looking for examples from other well-performing rail networks and build their organizational structures into FRA's rail planning process. Another attendee stressed the importance of strong, organized coordination that will result in the ability to show the public that progress is being made. Another attendee built on that idea, noting that planning momentum cannot be lost, and that FRA needs to take a more supportive role in planning, especially in the West.

Finally, an attendee presented three takeaways that their organization would advocate for with Congress, which included a full authorization of the rail network, providing seed funding to get the service development process off the ground, and having a federal-level entity that has a coordination role that will push implementation forward.

12. Conclusion

The Northwest regional working group meeting concluded with a look ahead at the future of the Long-Distance Service Study, which will include a final round of regional working group meetings in the early summer. FRA outlined study next steps, including identification of preferred routes for near, mid, and long-term implementation. The next round of regional working group meetings will include costs and public benefits of the preferred routes, presentation of the implementation schedules for the preferred routes, and presentation of the recommended actions of the study.

Attendees

- All Aboard Northwest
- All Aboard Washington
- Amtrak
- Association of Idaho Cities
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority
- Bismarck-Mandan Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Cheyenne Metropolitan Planning Organization
- City of Bismarck
- City of Boise
- City of Missoula
- Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS)
- FRA
- Idaho Transportation Department
- Mid-Columbia Economic Development District
- Missoula Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Montana Department of Transportation
- Nooksack Indian Tribe
- Oregon Department of Transportation
- Pacific Northwest Economic Region
- Rail Passengers Association
- South Dakota Department of Transportation
- Spokane Regional Transportation Council
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association
- Utah Transit Authority
- Valley Regional Transit
- Wasatch Front Regional Council
- Washington State Department of Transportation
- Western Transportation Institute – Montana State University Bozeman
- Yakima Valley Conference of Governments